

EDUCATION DATA IN CALIFORNIA: AVAILABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Californians have a lofty ambition—educational excellence for all students—for their public schools and annually invest over \$45 billion to achieve this worthy objective. How can policymakers and the public know how their elementary and secondary schools are doing and whether their investments are accomplishing their goals? Such questions are increasingly central to debates over education policy and the most effective way to allocate resources. The ability to answer these questions depends on strong data systems that collect the relevant information and make it available to various stakeholders in the education enterprise in accessible and understandable ways.

California is lagging most other states in developing education data systems capable of helping policymakers and others understand how schools are doing and how resources can be deployed most effectively and efficiently to increase student learning. The state has only in the last several years begun to move beyond the traditional approach to data collection: emphasizing discrete, disconnected data “silos” that address reporting and monitoring requirements but do not lend themselves to analyses that can guide policy and program improvement.

¹ Affiliation included for identification purposes only. The opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not represent those of RAND or any of its sponsors.

Despite some recent reductions, the state still has 125 active data collections in the California Department of Education (CDE) alone. CDE data is publicly available through several online websites and on School Accountability Report Cards; while useful for many purposes, this multiplicity of sources can itself be confusing and unwieldy for users. Important teacher data are collected by agencies that operate and report independently of CDE and cannot now be linked easily to school and student information.

California has taken a number of actions to enhance its public school information systems, including improved data management practices at CDE and, most significantly, the initial steps to implement both a student longitudinal data system (California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System or CALPADS) and a teacher longitudinal data system (California Longitudinal Teacher Integrated Data Education System or CALTIDES). Longitudinal data systems are essential for tracking such key policy-relevant variables as student and teacher mobility, changes in student achievement over time, and accurate graduation and dropout rates. They can provide information to help teachers tailor their instruction to individual student needs and enable policy makers to evaluate which educational programs and practices are associated with gains in student achievement.

Data management and longitudinal data system initiatives in California are promising, but their success is not yet assured. The state has not developed a “culture of data” that emphasizes the necessary connection between good data and school improvement efforts. Policy makers in some other states such as Florida and Texas recognized and acted on this link many years ago. California has not created strong incentives for school districts to care about the substance and quality of the data they provide to the state. Some state officials have had reservations about committing the resources necessary to expand state educational data systems,

in part because of concerns that a state constitutional ban against unfunded mandates could result in local demands to state funds to modify district information systems to meet new state requirements. The state's past track record in funding data initiatives has demonstrated only a half-hearted commitment. State policy makers failed to provide the funds necessary to meet targets for enrolling all districts in the California Student Information Services (CSIS), an initiative launched in 1997 to develop and implement an electronic stateside school information system to facilitate the exchange and reporting of student information by school districts to CDE. In 2006 the legislature declined to provide funding sought by CDE and the Legislative Analyst's Office to support local data activities and compensate districts for the work involved in maintaining the new student identifier system, the quality of which will be essential to CALPADS's successful implementation. The state is taking a narrow approach to CALPADS, with the Department of Finance insisting that federal requirements (data required by the No Child Left Behind Act) rather than the needs of California's policy makers and educators will determine what data elements will be included in the student data system.

California needs to address several challenges if its current data system initiatives are to fulfill their promise:

Leadership: California needs influential education data "champions." It seems unlikely that the state can build data systems capable of supporting data-driven policy and funding decisions without strong and long-term support from state leaders who can reduce inter- and intra-departmental and intersectoral rivalries and ensure that funding and other necessary support is available.

Funding. California needs to overcome its history of lukewarm support for education data system development. So far, the implementation of CALPADS and CALTIDES appears to rely heavily on the availability of federal funds. This raises questions about whether the ongoing, long-term commitment to communication and training that appears critical to the successful implementation and utilization of complex data systems will be made and about whether funding for new data initiatives will be driven by available federal dollars rather than a realistic assessment of the costs of effective development and implementation.

Access to the data. Stakeholders need to be able to access and use education data if the new California initiatives are to fulfill their potential. While current activities like DataQuest, Ed-Data, and SchoolMatters (all web-based services which draw on CDE data) do make a fair amount of information available, often in user-friendly fashion for those interested in descriptive data on particular schools, districts, or counties, the more far-reaching benefits for policymakers will come from researchers (both inside and outside government) who undertake analyses aimed at determining which educational programs and what kinds of resource use really make a difference in improving student achievement and in narrowing achievement gaps. California needs to develop policies and procedures for ensuring data access; in doing so it can draw on the experiences of other states that take different approaches to fostering the use of their education databases for analytical purposes.